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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [AMGT](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: SARG EFFORTS TO RESTRICT EMBASSY OPERATIONS

REF: A. USUN 00203
[1](#)B. DAMASCUS 1106
[1](#)C. DAMASCUS 1158

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche, per 1.4 b,d.

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: With increasing intensity over the past three months, the SARG has mounted an effort, spearheaded by the MFA, to restrict a range of Embassy operations. The SARG has imposed a new, centralized system of visa issuance, seriously impeding the travel of official Americans. It has prevented the Charge from meeting with anyone at the MFA higher than the Chief of Protocol, issued a directive ordering members of the Syrian Chambers of Commerce and Industry not to meet with Embassy officials, imposed new restrictions on DAO travel, and effectively limited PD's programming efforts, especially exchanges. In addition, the MFA is signaling that it may implement other measures to hamper the ability of reporting officers to meet with contacts. Several factors seem to have provoked this SARG conduct, including unhappiness over USG response to requests for visas for President Bashar al-Asad and many in his party to attend UNGA last fall, and limitations imposed on access to USG officials by the SARG Ambassador in Washington. Thus far, the Embassy is managing to accomplish its major objectives, although these restrictions are beginning to impinge upon operational requirements. While there is an ad hoc quality to some of these measures, the increasingly cumulative impact, supported by feedback from contacts, indicates that this effort represents a high-level shift in attitude by the SARG toward USG activities in country. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) The SARG over the past three months has begun implementing a series of measures, the net effect of which is to impede Embassy access and operations. Several factors seem to have contributed to the genesis of the measures, including the USG's failure to issue visas in a timely manner for President Bashar al-Asad and some of his party to attend UNGA last fall, evidence of increasing USG support for the political opposition and civil society in Syria, and sanctions on senior regime figures (Asif Shawkat) and key institutions (the Commercial Bank of Syria). The unhappiness of Syria's ambassador to the U.S., Imad Mustafa, over his limited access to USG officials, (as well as the delay in renewing visas for Syrian diplomats at the UN, ref A) also apparently contributed to this SARG effort.

[1](#)3. (C) This bureaucratic cold shoulder still seems to be in its early stages. Thus far, the Embassy is managing to accomplish its major objectives, although with increasing difficulty. For example, PD is still conducting its exchange programs, reporting officers are getting out to see contacts,

and DAO is traveling as needed. Nonetheless, if the SARG maintains this pressure over a sustained period, or increases it, Embassy functions will suffer. Thus far it is not clear if the SARG wants to send a relatively simple reciprocity message based on a perception that we have treated it cavalierly, or if the SARG has decided to implement, at the Embassy level, a component of its more confrontational posture, designed to get our attention and persuade us that ignoring Syria's interests will cause our interests in the region to suffer.

14. (C) VISAS: Over the past several months, the SARG has begun to slow-roll the issuance of visas for official Americans. Initially, the Embassy was able to resolve most of these through the MFA Chief of Protocol. This avenue now seems to be closed off, and the visa backlog has worsened. In recent weeks, a number of TDY'ers, including NEA/ELA Deputy Office Director, the RMO (despite regional accreditation), a DHS team set to do refugee assessment, a diplomatic courier, and a range of support personnel scheduled to perform critical maintenance at the Embassy (telephone technicians and Amman-based regional facilities managers) were not issued their visas and had to cancel travel plans, despite submitting applications weeks before the need to travel. At present, Embassy records indicate that the SARG is withholding issuance of 21 visas to applicants who have applied at various Syrian embassies overseas or in Washington in the past two months. This does not count the would-be TDY'ers mentioned above who had to cancel their trips.

15. (C) Apparently -- although we have never been informed officially of this here in Damascus -- the SARG has put in place new procedures to centralize at the Syrian Embassy in Washington the issuance of visas for official Americans. Each application will need to be accompanied by a dipnote from the State Department, according to informal explanations provided by working level officials in MFA Protocol. When asked why this was necessary, an official at Protocol pointed to what he termed "unreciprocal" visa adjudication by the USG, although none of the examples provided withstand scrutiny.

16. (C) EFFORTS TO RESTRICT PD PROGRAMMING: The SARG has also started to make clear via restrictions on the Embassy's Public Diplomacy program that the USG will not be able to go around the SARG to fund civil society and NGO's directly. These measures have included putting a high school exchange program on hold, failing to respond to the deadline for nominations for participants in teacher training and professional-development programs, and insisting that only SARG-nominated candidates be eligible for Syrian Fulbright grants (essentially eliminating AMIDEAST from the process of identifying candidates). PD recently received a dipnote indicating that beginning next year, American junior Fulbrighters will "be distributed" around the country to "ease pressure" on the University of Damascus (a fabricated problem as far as we can tell). The SARG has also refused to issue a residency permit for an English Language specialist, effectively preventing him from traveling out of the Damascus area to provide training at regional educational institutions. In addition, the SARG has also fundamentally changed over the past few months the way in which PD officers can interact with various SARG officials. In the past, officers were able to contact Ministry of Education or Higher Education officials directly for meetings on nominations and other programming requirements. Now, the MFA is forcing the Embassy to send a dipnote requesting meetings with officials from other Ministries, leading to intolerable delays. The MFA also has indicated it will send an MFA person from Protocol to liaise between PD and ministries where necessary.

17. (C) DAO TRAVEL HASSLES: The MFA has also intervened to try to restrict DAO from traveling out of Damascus. Per standard operating procedure for military attaches at all embassies in Syria, the DAO informally notified the Foreign Liaison Office of Syrian Military Intelligence of any planned

travel. On some occasions in the past, depending on where the travel was to occur, the DAO had the Embassy submit a dipnote informing the MFA of the travel. Now the MFA has begun insisting that DAO personnel cannot travel until the MFA has formally responded to a dipnote requesting authorization of such travel, an apparent violation of Article 26 of the Vienna Convention. One SMI contact told A/DATT that the measure has been implemented on the orders Hisham Ikhtiyar, the Ba'ath Party Regional Command National Security Office chief. In addition, other embassies are apparently not subject to such requirements, another violation of the Vienna Convention. The Embassy challenged this new system last week, sending two DAO officers to Aleppo by road simultaneous to a dipnote apprising the MFA of their intention to travel, as permitted by international agreement. Their travel went off unimpeded, and, to date, we have not heard from the MFA.

18. (C) MEETINGS AND CONTACT WORK: While it has never been easy to do reporting in Syria, due to the authoritarian nature of the regime, the SARG has begun in the past month to officially restrict Embassy efforts. On the economic side, the PM's office has issued a directive to all chambers of commerce and industry in Syria prohibiting contact with diplomats. Though the edict (which we have not yet seen) reportedly refers to all diplomats, we believe only U.S. diplomats have been refused meetings (ref B). Business contacts have said the SARG measure is meant to remind us that our unofficial engagement with Syrian society could fall victim to the lack of official engagement. In February, officials of the Aleppo Chambers of Industry and Commerce both refused to meet with visiting EconChief because of the new policy. Since then, Damascus officials of these chambers also refused to meet, specifically citing the new directive.

19. (C) On the political side, the MFA informed us, on the occasion of the visit by the Syria desk officer, that any visiting USG official needed MFA approval to meet with Syrians, without specifying whether the restriction was limited to visits with SARG officials. Although the Embassy submitted a dipnote requesting a meeting with Sunni religious leader Sheikh Salah Kuftaro (who, though he has good relations with the SARG, is not an official), Kuftaro was not given permission to hold the meeting and had to refuse. Two days later the MFA insisted that Poloff, without any Washington visitor, needed to submit a dipnote for approval before she could meet with Kuftaro. The Embassy refused and the meeting with Kuftaro, a long-standing Embassy contact, did not take place. The influential al-Hayat newspaper recently published an article about "new redlines" (ref C) that the SARG will be enforcing, one of which concerns Syrian contact with foreign officials. Given Syrians' intense fears about taking action that might anger their government, it is this redline that has been understood by most Syrians as a threat not to get involved or have contact with Embassy officers.

110. (C) COMMENT: While it is not yet clear to what extent the new restrictions on our operations extend beyond the U.S. Embassy to other diplomatic missions, our overwhelming sense is that we are the principal -- in most cases, the only -- target. The vague assertions of reciprocity by some SARG officials to explain these limitations on our contact and travel are likely true, both at an operational and political level. In both instances, the SARG seems to have decided that it will respond in kind to perceived slights from the USG: if its Ambassador cannot call freely on USG officials, the Charge d'Affaires in Damascus will be equally constrained. If we slow-roll visas for SARG officials in NY or elsewhere, we can expect the same treatment for our officials. Politically, this new posture of the SARG seems to reflect its conclusion that two can play the diplomatic-isolation game, and that until such time as we decided to re-engage officially, the day-to-day operations and programs of Embassy Damascus are fair game.

